- Language to Thrive, not just Survive -
An Analysis of English as a Second Language Education For Refugee Students in the U.S.

Mikaila Smith
Plan II Honors Program
The University of Texas at Austin

December 8, 2016

Uri Treisman
Department of Mathematics
Supervising Professor

Carlos Eric Bowles
UTeach – College of Liberal Arts
Second Reader

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In many ways, this thesis has been the perfect capstone to my undergraduate career at the University of Texas; it seems to touch on all the most significant elements of my education. My first volunteer interaction with refugees was during my time as a Rapoport Service Scholar. From my experience as an Archer fellow in D.C., I became interested in the policy side of this issue. My ability to dive into a topic, consider a wide variety of perspectives on the issue, and attempt to relay the information in a way that is relevant and interesting has grown immeasurably as a Plan II Honors student.

That being said, it feels appropriate to express my gratitude to a long list of individuals, so buckle up!

Thank you to my family – my parents Laura and Dominic, and my sister Gemma – who are consistently the best support team a frenzied college student could ever ask for and the most stupendously-awesome family a person could ever dream of.

Thank you to my partner – Elan – for his steadfast and loving dedication to supporting my personal development and goals in any way he can, often with enormous investments of time spent being an editor, sounding board, and cheerleader.

Thank you to my friends – old and new, you know who you are – whom I constantly learn from and am inspired by.

A massive thank you to my supervising professor – Uri Treisman – who is forever wise, kind, and refreshingly human, and who never fails to inspire and challenge me. A special thanks for his encouragement, support, and flexibility as the semester – and this project – took some unexpected twists and turns.

A tremendous thank you to my second reader and Rapoport Scholarship supervisor – Eric Bowles – whose mentorship and support has had such a profound impact on my life it may never truly be accounted for. I feel awed that I have been able to learn from him and the Rapoport community since my first year in college.

A big thank you to the folks at the Archer fellowship program – Katie and all the staff, Professors Swerdlow, Daly, and Chin – all of who work so hard to provide an incredible experience for students and to form a lasting sense of community.

A deep thank you to the organizations and people responsible for most everything I have learned about service and advocacy during my time in undergrad – Interfaith Action of Central Texas, United Way for Greater Austin and Sue Carpenter, AVANCE Austin, and Posada Esperanza.

Thank you to all of the Plan II staff and professors who work hard to create a remarkable educational experience for students and push them beyond their comfort zones.

Special thanks to Dr. Larry Carver, who encourages me to pursue opportunities I never would have otherwise, has invested a great deal of time in supporting me, and retains a sense of humor about it all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Author: Mikaila Smith

Title: Language to Thrive, not just Survive: an Analysis of English as a Second Language Education for Refugee Students in the U.S.

Supervising Professor: Uri Treisman

The U.S. has long been an international leader in refugee resettlement, admitting as many as 85,000 refugees annually. Refugees face many social and financial challenges as they begin their new life in the U.S., but evidence shows that –with support – refugee resettlement is revitalizing to the economy, and refugees are able to make unique and important contributions to U.S. society. About 35-40% of the refugees resettled in the U.S. every year are school-aged children.

Refugee children are two to three times more likely to drop out of high school than their American-born peers. While there are many factors that influence this high drop out rate, underfunded, insufficient and non-strategic English as a Second Language education can be identified as a key challenge that is often not met well. Research shows that it takes 4-7 years for the many refugee students who are classified as Limited English Proficiency (LEP) to achieve the same average academic achievement rates as their English-speaking peers. In short, in order for refugee students to succeed, they must be meaningfully supported to learn English well. This is an educational right that has been protected under federal law since 1974, yet in practice many schools fail their students – including refugees – who are English language learners (ELLs).

Why does this high drop out rate for refugee students exist? What does a meaningful education and proper support to develop English proficiency look like for refugee students? Are there existing, proven methods that could be applied to make a different on this issue? What are the challenges for implementation and reform? These are the questions that drove my research and writing on this topic. Throughout this work, I hoped to underscore the idea that this issue – education for refugee students in the U.S. – is multifaceted, complex, and in many ways requires more in-depth and long term research and evaluation. However, there *do* exist some viable, proven solutions that could be implemented: it is not an insurmountable, nor an inevitable, challenge. There is no silver bullet solution, but progress is possible. If the U.S. education system strives to take the plight and potential of refugee students very seriously, we stand to gain an incredible amount.

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, Mohammed[1] is an average kid. He loves playing soccer with his friends, feels ambivalent about homework, and revels in goofy pranks and witty jokes. Yet by the time Mohammed is 10, he has seen the houses of his neighbors burn as bombs fall, has mourned the murder of family members, and has fled the only home he has ever known out of desperation, arriving in a country where he doesn't know the language or the people. Mohammed is a refugee from Afghanistan. His family arrived in the U.S. six months ago, and he's spending his summer at iLearn, an academic summer camp for newly arrived refugee students in Austin, Texas. Though he struggles to learn the English alphabet, understand school structure in the U.S., and communicate with all the new people he's meeting, he is full of laughter and has a strong desire to learn.

Mohammed has a hard road ahead of him. Statistically speaking, he is two to three times more likely to not graduate from high school than his American-born peers[2]. He will be expected to keep up in grade-level classes with his peers, and will have the same amount of time to graduate before he ages out of the system. This seems like a big challenge given that he also has to learn English, a skill he will need *before* he can be successful in any of his other classes.

Newcomer schools present a viable solution to the problems faced by Mohammed and other English language learners (ELL) like him[3]. Newcomer schools are unique and

---

[1] This personal example is from the author's experience working with refugee children. The name and other details of the child described have been altered out of respect for the privacy and safety of the child's family.

[2] Krebs

[3] The term English Language Learners (ELL) is broad, and refers to any student who is not able to communicate effectively in English. Note that this can include

focused programs that typically feature flexible curriculums, English as a Second Language classes, and specially trained teachers. They have been shown to have a great impact on the educational results for refugee students. For instance, the High School of World Cultures, a newcomer school in New York City, had a 4-year graduation rate of 79% in the 2009-2010 academic year, a rate higher than either the New York City high school average (75%) or the citywide average for English language learners[4].

Despite the strong success of well-established newcomer programs, the vast majority of refugee students do not have access to these schools. The demand far outweighs the supply, as there are approximately 100,000 school age refugee youth in the U.S.[5] and only 63 active and well-established newcomer schools or programs, the largest of which serves some 450 students[6].

The lack of educational support for refugee students is a problem that has significant ramifications for the students' families, their new communities, and the U.S. as a nation. While a highly effective solution to these problems exists in some capacity, in the form of newcomer schools, they are currently not implemented or developed at the level necessary to serve the population of refugee students in the U.S. This paper will examine the challenges facing refugee students, the methodology and purpose of

---

populations such as immigrants, students who are living in the U.S. temporarily with their parents, and refugee students. Refugee students are the population that will be focused on in this work, but at times there may be overlap between these populations. From Ed Glossary.

[4] Short, pg. 5

[5] Calculated by the author based on the information gathered here: http://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/meeting-education-needs-rising-numbers-newly-arrived-migrant-students-europe-and-united-states

[6] Short, pg. 5

newcomer schools, and explore policy recommendations to bridge the gap between the supply of competent newcomer programs and the demand of refugee student populations.

CHAPTER I:

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS IN THE U.S.?

> *"Refugee students and their families typically leave their home countries under stressful and violent conditions and end up living in refugee camps for extended periods of time, uncertain of their chances for resettlement. Refugee students and their families who are fortunate enough to be chosen for resettlement arrive in their host country to some fi nancial, social, and work- related support from refugee resettlement organizations for a short period of time (oft en six months to a year), and then they are usually on their own in terms of building support systems within their neighborhoods and local communities. Due to this life in constant transition, students sometimes feel lost, alone, and unsupported by their teachers, classmates, and neighbors and confused by the expectations of their new schools' environments."*

- Kevin Roxas, "Creating Communities: Working with Refugee Students in Classrooms"

A refugee is a "person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of a 'well-founded fear of persecution' due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin"[7]. The United States has claimed international responsibility for assisting refugee populations since joining the United Nations Status of Refugees in 1968. A decade after that, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which continues to provide the legal and technical framework for the modern day U.S. Refugee Admissions Program[8]. The current worldwide refugee

[7] From section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act
[8] American Immigration Council

population is 21.3 million[9]. That population constitutes a wide variety of nations and peoples, with the top three countries of origin for refugee populations reported as Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia in 2016[10].

For each Fiscal Year, the President and Congress agree upon a refugee admissions threshold, a number that represents the maximum number of individuals that will be granted refugee status. In Fiscal Year 2016, this number is 85,000. Individuals who submit applications to gain refugee status are sorted into different priority groups, and then undergo extensive screening and interviews before arriving in the U.S., a process that usually takes at least two years. Once an individual or family has been granted refugee status, they travel to their resettlement location, and a volunteer agency provides the services they need for the first 3 months (rent, health and medical care, food, clothing, etc).

After six months of being in the country, refugees begin to pay back an interest-free loan to the government to reimburse their travel costs. Refugees can apply to become naturalized citizens after five years of living in the U.S.[11] The most common states for refugees to be resettled in are Texas, California, and New York, although in recent years refugees have increasingly been resettled in states such as Michigan and Illinois[12].

Of the refugees resettled in the U.S. every year, 35-40% are children, representing a total approximate population of 100,000 refugee children in U.S. school systems

---

[9] However, the population of people considered as forcibly displaced is over 60 million, so note that the official term refugee does not fully capture the populations that might, at some point, be considered refugees. From Edwards, Adrian.
[10] Ibid.
[11] American Immigration Council
[12] Zong, Jie

currently[13][14]. Many of these children arrive in the U.S. with little previous formal education, interrupted formal education, and/or limited or non-existent English[15]. Mental health issues have traditionally not been given adequate attention in refugee populations in the U.S., but studies show that children and adolescents who are refugees are at the highest risk for PTSD and major depression, at rates of 50-90% (different studies have found varying rates of prevalence, but even within the wide margin of rates it is remarkably high)[16].

After refugees are granted entrée into the U.S., the Department of State and nine national domestic resettlement agencies work in partnership to decide where to place refugees on a case-by-case basis. If the refugees being resettled have relatives already in the U.S., they are almost always resettled in the same location as their relatives. Beyond that heavily weighted consideration, the resettlement location process involves comparing the specific needs of the refugees (job opportunities, housing, medical and health care) with the availability of resources in a community[17]. From the available information on this process (via the Department of State) for refugee families with school age children, it

---

[13] Calculated by the author based on information from Migration Policy Institute
[14] It is relevant to note that in a global context, the percentage of refugee children placed within the United States or similar developed nations is extremely small. Just 14% of resettled refugees are hosted within the U.S. or another developed nation. There are approximately 12 million refugee children globally, and a staggering number of those do not have access to any type of formal education. However, their struggle, while dire and extremely important, is outside the scope of this paper. This paper will focus exclusively on educational systems for the refugee children who are resettled to the U.S., not out of ignorance but out of a need for focus. Information from Dryden-Peterson, Sarah.
[15] Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services
[16] Refugee Health
[17] Dept. of State

does not appear that a high priority is placed on resettling the family so that they have access to a school with support systems for refugee students[18].

Refugee families with children can expect to have "lower incomes and greater reliance on social benefits"[19] than refugee families without children, although there is some evidence that in the long run these families fare better because their children have a higher chance of being able to get a higher-paying job, due to their access to a formal U.S. education[20]. However, the overall poverty rate of refugees in the U.S. remains quite high: 45% of refugees in the U.S. live in a low-income household[21], compared with a national average of 30% of American households[22].

Data tells us that refugees who were resettled in the 1990's were often able to keep up in the U.S. economy; refugees resettled during that time period had household incomes equivalent to 62% of U.S.-born household incomes. Compare this with the data for refugees resettled in 2009-2011, who had household incomes equivalent to just 42% of U.S.-born households. The trend this data suggests is disheartening, as it indicates that refugees are progressively finding it more and more difficult to keep up with U.S.-born citizens[23].

It is relevant to note that outcomes on income, educational attainment, and English skills differ widely among refugees, often in strong correlation with their country of origin. For example, 79% of Somali refugees live in low-income households, compared

[18] Dept. of State
[19] Capps, pg. 9
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid, pg. 23
[22] Roberts
[23] Capps, pg. 21

with just 32% of Russian refugees[24]. This has to do with the in-country conditions and typical backgrounds of refugees from different countries. For example, a majority of Somali refugees have spent years living in refugee camps before coming to the U.S., a fact that increases the likelihood that they have had interrupted or no formal education and lack English skills.

By contrast, very few Russian refugees have lived in camps before coming to the U.S., and the chance that they are literate in their native language and had some formal schooling is much higher[25]. However, while this is an important consideration, it is still entirely possible to discuss outcomes for refugee populations on average, without special attention paid to their country of origin, as this paper will do. While many refugee analyst groups and federal government records do keep track of data based on country of origin, it is common to see implications and large-scale assessments of refugee populations' progress in the U.S. discussed in whole-population terms.

From the moment refugees arrive in the U.S., a heavy emphasis is placed upon finding employment and beginning the path to self-sufficiency. Refugee adults are required to begin working within 6 months of arrival, and in fact refugees are, on average, more likely to be employed than the U.S.-born population, meaning they are less likely to live on welfare. A common criticism of the Office of Refugee Resettlement's heavy focus on immediate employment (usually within the first sixty days after arrival to the U.S.) is that it prevents refugees with existing job skills to search for more

[24] Capps, pg. 23
[25] Ibid, pg 22.

meaningful employment that matches their professional experience, and funnels them into low-wage jobs regardless of educational or professional background[26].

Part of the problem lies in the limited funding that refugee service and support providers face. Overall funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement did increase in fiscal year 2013 to help with the sharp influx of unaccompanied minors crossing into the U.S. from the U.S.-Mexico border, but annual funding directed at supporting refugees has been flat lined for 25 years[27].

This lack of funding does not allow service providers adequate time to assist highly skilled refugees with employment searches. Especially for refugees who are unfamiliar with the process of job searching in the U.S. and for whom employment searches take a longer time, the pressure they face to begin earning an income may mean they accept a position for which they are over-qualified. Additionally, the focus on immediate employment means that many refugee support agencies cannot emphasize job-training or skills development in adult refugees as much as they would like to – the type of training that would allow refugees to develop skills and find better-paid jobs in the long term future.

In addition to the challenges that refugee youth face as their families struggle to get adjusted and find employment, refugee students often find U.S. schools a completely novel experience as well. For many refugee families, everything about a U.S. school is unfamiliar, such as expectations for students, social dynamics in classrooms, methods of instruction, types of activities or homework, and school schedule and calendar. Refugee

[26] Dryden-Peterson
[27] Ibid, pg. 6

students may face bullying or discrimination in school, especially if there is not a diverse population at the school they are placed at.

Schools and communities can be proactive about this simply by engaging in conversations around who refugees are, and why they are in the U.S. – areas of conversation that can sometimes be dominated by myths or misinformation. As Lisa Sherman, the Ad Council President & CEO whose organization has put up embracerefugees.org, a movement aimed at increasing awareness and acceptance of the presence of refugees in American communities, said, "The refugees that the U.S. takes in have been the frontline victims of war, political persecution, and terrorism. On top of fleeing horrific situations and already surviving so much, they are often met with fear and animosity when resettling in the U.S.[28]"

When schools take an active role in creating a welcoming environment for refugee students, they see better attendance rates, lower drop out rates, and higher rates of parental involvement. Successful schools have implemented initiatives such as: buddy or mentor systems, training students to offer tours of the school to newcomers, encouraging formal spaces in classrooms for students to share about their home cultures and languages, and host after school clubs that focus on world cultures. Schools must also use translators, orientation programs, and home visits where possible to ensure parent inclusion on students' education.

As one Afghan youth remembers, "In elementary school, this girl that I met said, 'Go back to where you came from.' People don't understand that you would have to go back to a war zone or a refugee camp. Those comments are emotionally painful… we were the

[28] Ad Council

lucky ones to come to the U.S., and we expected Americans to know why we came, but they didn't know.[29]" It is imperative that schools and communities take the arrival of refugee students as an opportunity to learn about a country, culture, and language different than theirs, and to celebrate, rather than diminish or fear, the unique background of that student.

U.S. schools differ from many refugees' country of origin in employing child-centered instruction in classrooms[30], and often "refugee children have no experience with child-centered activities or with teachers' expectations for their successful completion"[31]. Most refugee students are placed within public school systems with little advanced warning to teachers and administrators, and teachers may have little or none previous experience in instructing refugee students. This can lead to teachers assuming "that because of [refugee students'] silence, failure to ask questions, and difficulty in self-directed exploration, refugee children have few contributions to make in class. Instead, refugee children may be following what they understand to be proper classroom conduct"[32].

Refugee children face many challenges both in and out of schools, and they need all the support they can get to navigate them. Refugee students have a unique love for America, appreciation of the opportunities they are given, and a valuable perspective and life experience to share. It is beneficial for any student to interact with refugee students and form a cross-cultural relationship, and communities can learn much from refugee

---

[29] Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services, spring 2008 spotlight.
[30] Child-centered instruction refers to expectations by teachers that children "participate by working in groups, asking questions, and engaging in exploration." From ibid, pg. 15.
[31] Ibid, pg. 14
[32] Ibid, pg. 15

students and their families, as well. This learning and cultural exchange must be supported and facilitated by institutions and leaders using proven and effective methods.

Life for refugee students in the U.S. is exciting and challenging. Resettlement in the United States is often something that the family has been working towards for years, yet many will find when they arrive that they face critical challenges in succeeding as citizens in the U.S., including challenges in upward economic mobility and educational attainment. Only 7% of refugee students speak English well when they arrive to the U.S., so for the vast majority of refugee students the challenges they face in their homes and at their schools are compounded by the challenge of learning English[33]. Without the proper support, many students will find it extremely difficult to keep up in school and will be dealing with, at home, the pressures and challenges that come with limited financial resources.

However demanding these challenges may be, they are offset by potential that many refugee students show, when given the proper support. Amy Hewett-Olatunde, the 2014 Minessota Teacher of the Year, currently works in a newcomer school designed for refugee students, and noted in an interview that "discipline issues are almost non-existent… students are very appreciative of their education"[34]. Patricia Engler, another teacher who works with refugee students, noted of one student who initially struggled greatly:

> "[Her] growth this year has just been tremendous. She has discovered within herself a love of learning, a strong determination to succeed as a student, and a great community spirit. She now volunteers tutoring younger refugee children at the community center in her housing building, works with the elderly at a senior home,

[33] Capps, pg. 11
[34] Carnock

> and is a nominee for a HOPE Scholarship. She is currently looking forward to going to high school next year. She now wants to become a teacher so she can go back to Somalia to teach, and have students, especially the girls, enjoy learning. She wants to take what she learned here in the U.S. to her country, so that no other child has to suffer like she did in school [back in Somalia]"[35]

Refugees have the ability to contribute in important ways to American society, when supported properly. There are many success stories of refugees who have positively impacted U.S. society: the first woman to be Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, was a refugee, as was the co-founder of Google, the Grammy-award-winning artists Regina Spektor and Wyclef Jean, and the creator of Sriracha Hot Sauce. Refugees have made contributions in technology, international diplomacy, art, music, and science[36].

Of course, refugees do not need to become accomplished scientists, diplomats or artists to have a positive contribution. Evidence shows that in many cases, refugees revitalize the work force and can offer a solution to development issues faced in some areas of the U.S. The recent RISE study, a five-year study on refugee integration experiences in Colorado:

> "showed that not only do refugees successfully integrate over time, but that their ability to establish connections outside their immediate community – something called 'social bridging' – can speed up that trajectory…communities that focus on creating an inviting environment, and on reducing the barriers that refugees and other immigrants face in achieving full participation (such as making it easier for newcomers to learn English…) can benefit in numerous ways.[37]"

In central Ohio, an area that has resettled over 16,000 refugees within the last fifteen or so years, refugee resettlement agencies estimate that the economic contributions of refugees far outweigh the necessary expenditures involved in resettling refugees to the

---

[35] Roxas, pg. 13
[36] Refugee Council USA
[37] Lubell

area. The agencies said in a report last year that annual costs involved in resettling refugees amount to about $6 million a year, with much of that funding coming directly from federal sources. The agencies estimate that the annual economic impact of the refugee population in central Ohio is $1.6 billion, "including nearly $36 million in spending"[38].

In a small town in Vermont, the mayor directly petitioned the state's resettlement agency to send refugees to his town, Rutland, in order to fill vacant housing and entry-level jobs. Last year inn Fargo, North Dakota, refugees were similarly used to affect positive population and economic growth, and the mayor continues to be enthusiastic about the results, saying, "Our refugees have come in and brought a lot to our community… they opened a mosque, and people came in and said, 'Oh, this is just like a Lutheran social. There's food'"[39]. Examples like this show that there is already a strong, evidence-based and rational, rather than emotional, desire to accommodate and assist refugees admitted into the U.S.

It can be easy to forego these types of examples under the political vitriol that characterizes many discussions about refugees being admitted to the U.S. It is important to remember that it has been shown, in numerous instances and over long periods of time, that when resettled strategically (to areas that would benefit from the particular type of economic and workforce contributions that refugees are capable of making) and given proper support, refugees are fully capable of integration and contribution. In this context, it becomes even more vital to ensure that the new generation of refugees – the children who arrive and enroll in schools – are supported, for only then will they be able to

[38] Pyle
[39] Henderson

progress, develop their potential, and support their families and communities. The positive effects of refugees on U.S. society and economy are already seen and measured; imagine what they would be if every refugee child was meaningfully supported to learn English and succeed in school.

CHAPTER II:

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO LEARN ENGLISH?

"Linguistic integration by immigrants can have similar economic benefits for both immigrants and native workers alike. Improving the English language skills of immigrants can boost their productivity, increasing the range and quality of jobs to which they have access and closing the earnings gap between immigrants and the U.S.-born. A 2004 study by Hoyt Bleakley and Aimee Chin, using data from the 1990 Census, finds that among adults who had immigrated to the United States as children, greater fluency in English is associated with higher earnings later in life."

- Report published by the Obama administration's Task Force on New Americans[40]

"*While [many] factors – such as motivation, persistence, and quantitative skills – play important roles in the learning process, it is not possible to overstate the role that language plays in determining students' success with academic content."*

- Report by the Center on Instruction on Research-Based Recommendations for Serving Adolescent Newcomers[41]

English skills are key for success in school, and beyond. Kibiriti Majuto, a refugee high school student in Charlottesville, Virginia, remembers

> "being astounded by the amount of testing required to determine his grade and language placement. [He] came away from the testing troubled by how essential the language was to non-language subjects like mathematics, which often use short stories to illustrate problems. These types of language-intensive problems simultaneously test language and math skills, making it impossible to disentangle one evaluation from the other.[42]"

Liv Thorstensson, a researcher at the University of Illinois, notes that for most immigrants and refugee students, English is directly linked with gaining social capital, and all "policies, practices and everyday interactions in American schools illustrate that

[40] White House Task Force
[41] Center on Instruction
[42] Delgado

for an individual to be considered a valuable member of and to hold status within a group they must speak unaccented, Standard American English.[43]" Thorstensson puts forth an interesting hypothesis; that it is precisely because of language-based discrimination that there is an overwhelming lack of support for and investment in students who are English Language Learners.

However, it must be noted that while it is important to think critically about the possible ramifications of language-bias and perpetuated inequality or oppression on the basis of language skills, a developed conversation around the topic is outside the scope of this work. Still, it is relevant to consider, when thinking about the issues that exist within English as a Second Language education for English Language Learners and refugee students in particular, whether these issues exist for discriminatory reasons.

English language skills can be identified as a key skill for school success and high school graduation. Students who are proficient in English experience dramatically different outcomes in school than students who have Limited English Proficiency (are classified as LEP students). For example, only 29% of ELL students score at or above a basic level of reading, compared with 75% of their non-ELL peers[44]. This difference in outcomes continues into the job market, where Limited English Proficiency adults earn 25-40% less than their English proficient counterparts, even when other factors (such as level of education) are the same. These numbers come from a study on employment and wages for LEP adults by the Brookings institution. The study concluded, "English proficiency is an essential gateway to economic opportunity for workers in the United

[43] Thorstensson, pg. 4
[44] National Education Association

States. Yet access to acquiring these skills is persistently limited by a lack of resources and attention… it is in our collective interest to tackle this challenge head on"[45].

Here it is important to develop a larger context for the English Language Learner population. Almost exclusively, refugee students are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) – but they represent a very small subset of the population of students who are English Language Learners. In 2013-2014, there were an estimated 4.5 million students enrolled in U.S. schools who were classified as English Language Learners, or 9.3 % of all students[46].

The number of students who are ELLs has grown by 60% in the last decade, while the general student population has experienced a 7% growth rate. Researchers believe that the population of ELLs will continue to increase, and to become an increasingly important group to give attention and resources to[47]. It is a common misconception that all English Language Learners are immigrants, newcomers, or refugees, but in fact the majority of ELLs enrolled in U.S. schools are native-born American citizens: 85% of ELL students in elementary school fall into this category, and 62% of middle and high school ELL students[48].

Refugee students represent just 5% of English Language Learners, and around 0.5% of the general student population in the U.S.[49]. In advocating for increased investment in and reform of quality education for refugee students, it is important to have this frame of reference. It must be anticipated that many interest groups and actors within education

---

[45] Wilson
[46] National Center for Education Statistics
[47] Breiseth
[48] Ibid.
[49] Percentages estimated by author based on population numbers.

will be skeptical about the value of investing energy and time into a population that is proportionally very small. This issue will be addressed at least in part throughout the paper and an examination of policies will include a discussion of how English as a Second Language education reform can benefit many students and their surrounding communities.

Schools are required by federal law to provide quality education for students who are English Language Learners. This has been the case since January 21st, 1974 and the decision of the United States Supreme Court of *Lau v. Nichols*. In the ruling, the court decided that the San Francisco school system was obligated to support the 2,856 students of Chinese ancestry enrolled in its public schools, including 1,800 students who had absolutely no access to supplemental English instruction[50]. In its decision, the court noted that the schools could choose to assist students in learning English, could provide instruction in Chinese, or could explore other methods. The court was firm in its analysis that if a student does not speak the language they are being taught in, their education is not meaningful, and schools are required to provide a meaningful education for each and every student[51].

The decision also stated, "Where inability to speak and understand the English language excludes national origin-minority group children from effective participation in the educational program offered by a school district, the district must take affirmative steps to rectify the language deficiency in order to open its instructional program to these students"[52]. Shortly after the case, the *Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974* was

[50] Dept. of Ed.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

passed, stating that "No state shall deny educational opportunities to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin by (f) the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs.[53]"

However, since this initial landmark case there have been many cases concerning the same subject in state courts, some of which have advanced the rights of English Language Learner students, and some of which have eroded the support provided to students[54]. In 2010, a lower Texas court ruled "the state had failed to provide adequate education to non-native English speakers in its secondary schools"[55]. However, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals later scrapped the ruling, finding insufficient evidence presented in the original case. If upheld, the decision would have required more than 1,000 Texas school districts to embark upon a massive "reorganization of not only the way the state tracks the performance of underperforming Spanish-speaking students but also the programs used to educate them.[56]"

In February of 2015, a conference on this issue held in Texas at Our Lady of the Lake University highlighted the statistic that there are *no* secondary schools in Texas that exceed academic benchmarks and requirements for English Language Learner students. The conference also concluded that, to no one's great surprise, schools that were better able to meet their ELL students needs were much more significantly funded. A growing movement in education to change the method by which schools are funded generally,

---

[53] Wright
[54] More information can be found in the 2010 book *Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners: Research, Theory, Policy and Practice* by Wayne E. Wright.
[55] Roebuck
[56] Ibid.

especially in Texas, underscores the need for better funding of ELL support programs in schools. Last year, Texas District Court Judge John Dietz "ruled in the largest school finance case in Texas' history that the current system of education funding was 'constitutionally inadequate, unsuitable, and financially inefficient.[57]'"

In Pennsylvania this year, six refugee students are suing their school district on the basis of being denied access to a quality education. The students were automatically enrolled in Phoenix Academy, an alternative high school for "underachieving" students that has strict security and disciplinary features. Their attorney, Reggie Shuford of the Pennsylvania American Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement that these students "have already experienced much trauma and loss before arriving in this country. Rather than helping them make the difficult adjustment by providing educational resources required by law, the school district has denied them an education completely or forced them into an alternative school, where they are often bullied and don't learn.[58]"

For many refugee students, better English education and increased English proficiency may be the answer to some of the social stigmas refugees face and the stress of acculturation. As research has found, "English language proficiency has a strong correlation with refugee students' socialization with their native peers… limited English proficiency of…refugees in speaking strongly affected the level of social alienation they experienced[59]. In the same study, researchers identified language as one of three key components that influenced refugee students' academic and social developments. The importance of language can be emphasized at many levels: "First, in schools spoken

[57] Johnson
[58] Fox News
[59] Bal, pg.

language is the medium through which much learning takes place and through which students demonstrate what they have learned. Secondly, unlike other social institutions, teachers have some control of that talk to enhance learning. Thirdly, spoken language is part of the identities of all learners.[60]"

If English can be identified as a key factor in enabling refugee students to do well in school, then the importance of doing well in school for refugee students must be underscored as well. Research conducted within the last 10 years has identified that "refugee children's identities formed in school have very important implications for their academic, emotional/behavioral, and economic outcomes, and social adaptation to the United States.[61]"

An important aspect of the debate around English language education is the fact that oftentimes, students begin to learn conversational English that they use in social situations far earlier than they are able to comprehend the English used in a classroom or academic assignment. In some cases, these two different 'types' of language are referred to as Street English vs. School English. Researchers have identified that the perceived difference and difficulty between these two types of English often stems from a "cognitive deficit oriented approach toward bilingual immigrant and minority students…with deficit-oriented paradigms, sorting [refugee students] into residual categories like English language learner exclude[ed] them from the inclusive educational settings, and prevent[ed] them from using their knowledge and expertise in other

[60] Bal pg. 33
[61] Bal pg. 58

languages and literacies while acquiring new ones… [this was] not only bad for their language and literacy acquisitions but also marginaliz[ed] them.[62]"

Too often, educators' understanding of the importance of learning English in refugee students' success results in the students' "needs, potentials, and futures [being] evaluated and constructed against not only the cultural-historical character of the English language learner students but the '*special education kids'* the students in special education programs.[63]" In many anecdotal and evidence-based reports, there are tales of an English as a second language students' "behaviors and academic performances [being] measured by grades and the high-stake English language proficiency tests.[64]"

Educators and schools showed a lack of understanding about the needs of refugee students, and an eagerness to place refugee students in 'remedial' programs for struggling or failing students, without first providing the time and type of support that is most effective for refugee students. While English language acquisition must be emphasized for all students, it must be done in a context that recognizes the individual needs and abilities of each student, without pigeonholing students as 'struggling' when they have not been given a proper opportunity to learn. Refugee students must be understood as having special assets and special challenges, rather than being considered to be lacking inherent smartness or intelligence.

Upwards social mobility and success in the United States depend upon being able to use English in both formal and informal settings and having a high degree of English literacy. Obtaining a high school degree similarly relies upon proficiency in English.

---

[62] Bal pg. 130
[63] Bal pg. 132
[64] Bal pg. 133

Americans with a high school degree are likely to earn $10,000 more in annual earnings than high school drop outs, are 4 percentage points more likely to be employed, and are more likely to be civically engaged – only 26% of high school drop outs voted in 2010, while 40% of those with a high school diploma voted[65]. There is a strong case for the singular importance of a high school diploma in allowing Americans to participate in and strengthen democracy. Like every other student enrolled in school in the United States, refugees deserve a meaningful and adequate education. Proper English education and intensive support to successfully graduate from high school must be made available to refugee students, or else we are complicit in a significant waste of the talent, global perspective, and potential that refugee students possess.

The United States continues to recognize its humanitarian and moral responsibility to admit as many refugees each year as is possible. These admitted refugees are uniquely poised to contribute to society: they are persons who tend to have a deep and abiding love for the United States, a multicultural and diverse upbringing, and native language skills that can allow them to serve as the bridge between two countries. Secretary Madeleine Albright, who is a strong advocate for refugee rights and entered the U.S. at age 11 as a refugee herself, remembers of her own experience, "I will never forget sailing into New York Harbor for the first time and beholding the statue of Liberty… Like all refugees, I shared a hope to live a safe life with dignity and a chance to give back to my new country.[66]"

[65] Kokemuller
[66] Garunay

CHAPTER III:

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS?

> "*A number of school districts around the United States have tried to address the challenges and pressures on [English Language Learners] by developing and implementing newcomer programs… defined as 'specialized academic environments that serve newly arrived, immigrant English language learners for a limited period of time'…The main goals of these programs are the following: help students acquire beginning English skills, provide some instruction in core content areas, guide students' acculturation to the school system in the United States, and develop or strengthen students' native language literacy skills.*"
>
> - Report by the Center for Applied Linguistics on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation of New York

Newcomer programs, as defined above, present an interesting solution to the educational challenges that English Language Learners, and especially refugee students, face. A newcomer is defined as a subset of English Language Learners who enrolls in school at middle or high school age, and is also adjusting culturally to being in the U.S. Many newcomer students are refugees. A number of newcomer programs already exist all across the United States, and they can take diverse forms. Some newcomer programs are four-year high schools that only serve newcomer students and have their own campuses and specialized staff and teachers, while others are two-year programs that are situated within the campus and context of a larger high school.

Just as newcomer programs may seek to serve English Language Learners through a variety of set-ups and curriculum approaches (and often limited or heavily defined by available funding), newcomer programs also experience a wide gradation of success rates in supporting English Language Learner students. It is important to note that more data on newcomer programs is needed: there is very little conclusive, long-term data that tracks program innovations or student outcomes. However, it is possible to discuss what

we do know about newcomer programs and their best practices to imagine how, in an ideal world, education for refugee students would be implemented. We will then proceed to discuss how, within the existing context of policies and education, possible realistic improvements could be made in the short-term.

One of the most significant reports on newcomer schools was conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. CAL surveyed newcomer programs in the U.S. and developed data from these observations, creating a searchable database of the varied types of existing newcomer programs, while also providing a case study of 10 newcomer programs that seem to be succeeding. CAL noted in their report that "there is no one set model for a newcomer program. Middle and high school newcomer students exhibit a variety of characteristics and thus programs must be carefully designed to meet their needs. Besides newcomers' different native languages and countries of origin, the differences in their literary skills and educational backgrounds prove to be the most important factors of a newcomer program's design.[67]" However, in CAL's own analysis of newcomer schools there are strong themes that emerge as consistent best practices for newcomer programs.

The CAL report summarizes those best practices as:

> "flexible scheduling of courses and students, careful staffing plus targeted professional development, basic literacy development materials for adolescents and reading interventions adapted for English language learners, content area instruction to fill gaps in educational backgrounds, extended time for instruction and support (e.g. after school, Saturday and summer programs), connections with families and social services, diagnostics and monitoring of student data, and transition measures to ease newcomers into the regular school programs or beyond high school.[68]"

Newcomer students can be divided into the following four categories:

---

[67] Short, page V
[68] Ibid, page VI

> "*literate, on-level newcomers:* students with educational backgrounds who have literacy skills and academic schooling in their own language that align with their grade level. *Literate, partially schooled newcomers:* students with native language literacy skills and some academic schooling. *Newcomer students with interrupted education:* students with disrupted or weak educational backgrounds and below-grade-level or no literacy in their own native language. *Late-entrant immigrant newcomers:* students who enter after first quarter or semester.[69]"

Refugee students can fall into in any of these four categories, but the third group is the most vulnerable group of students and the most at risk for educational failure because they have no English knowledge in addition to little content-based knowledge in their native language. It's worth focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable group of students, as an ideal program would focus on serving the most at-risk students and then be able to adjust if students were more advanced.

Many of the newcomer programs in the CAL report did not track students after they transitioned out of the newcomer program and into a regular school; but for the newcomer programs that did, it was evident that the transition was difficult for newcomer students[70]. Unique models like the High School of World Cultures in the Bronx, NY are four-year (or more, in the case of some students) schools themselves, and have the express goal of granting a high school diploma to their students (as opposed to, for example, the goal of many two-year programs of giving students a certain level of English proficiency before they transfer to their new school). Providing the necessary specially-trained teachers, funding, and space within school districts for an entire four-year high school to serve newcomer students is a formidable challenge, and not realistic to meet the needs of all newcomer students. Some feasible approaches will be looked at

[69] Ibid, page 4
[70] Ibid, pages 10-15

in the next chapter, but this chapter will put the question of feasibility aside and focus on best practices for English language learners.

It is critical that newcomer programs, or any educational model or program trying to serve refugee students, have clear and effective methods of assessing and placing students and monitoring students' progress. This type of assessment should be more individualized and emphasized than the types of general assessments that refugee students will have to take when they enroll in school, such as the annual assessment tests created by No Child Left Behind. For any program wanting to create a diverse curriculum for refugee students, wherein part of their day is spent in English language learner classrooms and part of their day is spent as a student being integrated into a classroom with English-speaking students (cluster model), it is essential that testing be administered both in English and in the students' native language[71].

It has often been difficult for schools to procure updated or level-sensitive native language testing, but it should be a priority for schools as, in some cases, refugee students can speak little or no English and yet have a relatively high area of content knowledge in, say, math or science. When it is discovered that a student has uneven language and content area levels of knowledge, all attempts must be made to simultaneously develop both areas of knowledge.

Schools should recognize that the demographics of English language learner students, and especially refugee students, are incredibly diverse, and while it is important to properly assess students, the administered testing must be sensitive and flexible. Very few refugee students will perform well on federally mandated standardized-testing like

[71] Center on Instruction, pg. 26

No Child Left Behind, which means that states and school districts should push for accommodating policies that recognize the implicit disadvantages that English language learner students face. Schools should use multiple types of assessments, and administer them throughout the year. All tests administered should be evaluated for their effectiveness in producing sound results and avoiding bias, and schools should support students by offering "appropriate testing accommodations by reducing the linguistic complexity of assessment tools wherever possible.[72]"

It is important that teachers and administrators are aware of the need for fair testing, and that they resist the urge to assess students purely through testing; teacher's reports, students' class performance, and academic records should be used in assessment as well. It is particularly important that teachers and administrators not allow poor test scores to influence their attitudes towards English language learners. All efforts and educational approaches should be made with the firm understanding that a lack of English language proficiency implies nothing about students' natural intelligence, ability to improve, or their content knowledge (oftentimes, students are simply unable to express what they know in English – this underscores the importance of both English and native language testing and assessments.[73])

Instilling an understanding of the different between natural intelligence and English ability is extremely important. While many teachers know this, it can be difficult to remember it if they are not trained to work with English language learner students, who, if not given the proper support, will often appear unengaged and unmotivated in classes. As one school psychologist remembers,

---

[72] National Council of Teachers of English, pg. 6
[73] Ibid, pg. 6

> "My first year… I tested elementary students for special education eligibility. One teacher was thankful I was there because she was convinced her student, a first-year Hispanic immigrant, was, in her words, 'learning disabled.' She shared that he hadn't talked, was disengaged, and just sat at his desk throughout most of the year. As soon as I met Alonso, I immediately connected with him. After testing him in his native language, I discovered that not only was his intelligence intact, he had a lot of cognitive strengths and the potential to go far in life. I told Alonso how smart he was and not to let anyone tell him otherwise. It gave me a lot of pleasure to meet with his teacher and give her the results of the test. It was a learning experience for both of us. I'm happy to report this attitude is no longer typical in my district. There has been a lot of training for general education teachers to increase their awareness. But I know not every district is as enlightened, and I wonder how many potential future educators and engineers and physicians are being written off as mentally deficient.[74]"

Early intervention is key for English language learner students, and there are dynamic models that exist of how to tackle the knowledge gaps of students who have histories of interrupted formal education *and* are non-English speaking. For example, at the Columbus Global Academy in Ohio, a whole-school newcomer program, they have

> "created a specialized pathway to help [students] reach graduation and encourage them to stay in school… the program offers a pre-ninth grade level with a special curriculum for the students to acquire basic skills, such as arithmetic, the English alphabet, social and academic vocabulary, initial reading skills, and the like. Some students stay in the pre-ninth grade for 2 years. They would then enter the appropriate courses for their 9th- and 10th-grade years, including a double period of ESL and single periods of math, science, and social studies.[75]"

The colloquialism "it takes a village" has never been truer than in the instance of newcomer students. Research describing successful and effective support for English language learners emphasizes that the approach of the school is to base its entire curriculum around serving these students, rather than focusing only on what happens in classroom instruction. The best curriculum approaches use "school wide, team-based support; dual-language; and cluster-model initiatives"[76]. English language learners learn

---

[74] National Education Association, pg. 32
[75] Short, pg. 41
[76] Rodriguez, pg. 14

best when their teachers are involved beyond the allotted time the student spends in a classroom, and when teachers coordinate with each other. Teachers should be part of a cross-disciplinary team that is responsible for tracking the performance and needs of newcomer students. This should include a teacher who is an English-language specialist and whose intensive English reading, writing and speaking instruction constitute a significant portion of the students' day, and this teacher should regularly communicate and coordinate with the students' subject-area teachers. These teams of teachers should "meet regularly to align curriculum; plan integrated, cross-content projects; address student concerns; and monitor student progress.[77]"

English language learner students work best when they are offered intensive English learning support as well as inclusion in a regular classroom. This is referred to as the English language learner cluster model, and it,

> "provides benefits to English language learners and English-speaking students…In implementing this cluster model, [content-area teachers who are trained in ESL methods] use elements of the sheltered-instruction approach for ELLs in a class with ELLs and native English speakers. This integration helps both ELLs and native English speakers because classroom aides who speak the ELLs' native languages may assist them and native English speakers benefit from the diverse perspective the multilingual students bring to class discussions.[78]"

Unique models like the High School of World Cultures in the Bronx or the Columbus Global Academy in Ohio have experienced the benefits of avoiding what is termed 'language segregation' – a phenomenon many newcomer programs experience wherein beginner students of English have few interactions or classes with students who are more proficient English speakers, or even native English speakers. This is ultimately detrimental to English language learner students. The less time students spend shuffling

---

[77] Rodriguez, pg. 13
[78] Rodriguez, pg. 13

between classes or transitioning from program to program and the more that a school or program can take a holistic approach and feel that they have all four years of high school to cultivate a student's language skills, the better[79]. This approach is a strong case for emphasizing that the answer to proper education for English language learner students need not lie exclusively in specialized, newcomer high schools whose student body is entirely English language learners (whole-school programs). It is plausible that newcomer programs that provide support for students all four years, but are integrated into a regular four-year high school, could be highly effective.

In a classroom of mixed English language learner students and English-speaking students, teachers can employ sheltered-English instruction techniques to ensure that ELLs are able to keep up to the best of their ability. In sheltered English classes, teachers "use clear, direct, simple English and a wide range of scaffolding strategies to communicate meaningful input in the content area to students. Learning activities that connect new content to students' prior knowledge, that require collaboration among students, and that spiral through curriculum material, offer ELLs the grade-level content instruction of their English-speaking peers, while adapting lesson delivery to suit their English proficiency level.[80]"

Teachers must be trained in this type of instruction, as it can be a challenge to make the class accessible for English language learners without oversimplifying or dumbing-down the content of the class. In these types of integrated classrooms, all students are held to the same high level of achievement expectations. As the year goes on or students advance, teachers must also be able to assess students' progress in reading, writing or

[79] Short, pg. 34
[80] Brown University

speaking English and be able to gradually adjust the level and expectations of the class to continue challenging students. This type of attention to detail and special dedication requires additional training and effort for teachers, but it is a well-proven method of instruction that began to be used in English language learner classrooms in the 1980's[81].

It has been established that for most refugee students, the process of learning English and becoming better equipped to succeed in school is one that takes place over many years. A teacher cannot expect to fit everything refugee students need to know into their class work over those years; rather, teachers should focus on setting up effective independent learning habits for refugee students that they will develop in the long term. This can mean teaching students how to be able to read and approach challenging readings with new vocabularies, by emphasizing skills like breaking down a word or using dictionaries and glossaries[82]. Teachers can also emphasize teacher modeling as an instructional habit; wherein they show students how they think through a problem or tricky phrase by thinking aloud and letting the student follow along with their reasoning.

In Chapter II, it was mentioned that educators and schools have a habit of viewing refugees students' challenges as inherent weaknesses, rather than as part of what makes refugee students unique, with unique potential. In one case study of a high school in Arizona that has a 10% refugee population, the author identified that teachers and administrators often talked about the "*family-at-home-problem*" as something that prevented refugee children from succeeding. In interviews, teachers said that often their refugee students' homework did not get done, because when they went home there was no one who spoke English or could help them. Teachers tended to have a defeated

---

[81] Ibid.
[82] Department of Education, pg. 16

attitude about this, and expressed with regret the insurmountable fact that refugee students were simply not able to do as well, academically, as English-speaking students[83].

In another case study, performed at a rural Midwestern school with very few newcomer students, the author found that teachers had built a study hall into the day and created after school programs to help students with their homework. Teachers and newcomer students reported that all of their homework was generally completed during that allocated time, and two parents reported being pleasantly surprised that their child was always able to complete their homework, because the parents felt they wouldn't have known how to help their student[84]. This is an example of a school approaching the unique challenge of refugee students with a dedication to flexibility and support. This study hall and afterschool program was open to and benefited English-speaking students, as well, so it was not limited in its impact.

Similarly, many of the in-classroom instructional tools that have been shown to benefit students who are English language learners provide other students with new methods of understanding what is being taught and creating a framework for how to analyze it. For example, best practices recommend that teachers with English-language learners be especially sure to explain concepts two or three times in different ways, to make learning engaging by using a lot of visual tactics, and to frequently stop and assess what students are comprehending and where their attention is waning, or to paraphrase in more simple terms the subject that was just covered. Another key tool involves teachers making connections for students, by relating subjects covered in class to subjects they

[83] Bal, pg. 58
[84] Rodriguez, pg. 37

know the students have been exposed to previously; either in their class, or, ideally, in one of the students' other classes[85].

Additionally, in successful mixed ELL and English-speaking classrooms, teachers became very conscious of their vocabulary, and how they gradually mixed new vocabulary into their speech over time, as opposed to inundating their sentences with complex or technical phrasing. This type of engaged and accessible teaching does not sacrifice high expectations for students nor does it prevent complex ideas from being learned in class; it simply provides all students with a more thorough foundation for understanding a lesson, and demands more frequent check-ins with students and awareness of the possibility that students are not comprehending everything that is being taught.

It is very important to "provide opportunities for students to work in groups to enhance a collaborative learning environment"[86]. Anecdotal evidence shows that students often do not enjoy being paired on a 'mixed-ability' basis, where one student is a high-performing student, and one student is a low-performing student, but the answer may lay in having students perform collaborative tasks that encourage creative thinking or free association or some type of game, rather than a classically-designed assignment[87]. If teachers and administrators actively encourage refugee students to become integrated into the social fabric of school by joining clubs, societies, or by assigning peer mentors or buddies, it is possible that this type of in-classroom collaboration will become more beneficial for all students involved.

---

[85] Ibid, pg. 43
[86] Ibid, pg. 45
[87] Ibid, pg. 50

The parents of refugee students may be less able to help their students with academic work than the parents of English-speaking students, but this does not mean that parents of refugee students are not important. They are critically important to creating an environment that has high expectations and provides a high level of support for refugee students. Educators and administrators should make sure that parents feel they are a part of the community. When parents feel involved, they are more likely to understand the importance of and be invested their child finishing school, and "feel invested in improving the condition of their classroom and school so that all in their learning community benefit.[88]"

Key strategies to ensure that parents feel involved include: "Hire a parent/family liaison, offer on-site adult ESL classes, conduct an orientation day, prepare a translated [into the parent's native language] packet of key information, show a video about the school, conduct parent walk-throughs of classrooms…invite guest speakers of interest (e.g., firefighter, nurse, public librarian, immigration specialist) to parent workshops and PTA meetings, publish and translate parent newsletter, train a cadre of parent volunteers who would welcome new families, help in school, and provide other forms of orientation.[89]" In addition, staff should be explicit in addressing cultural norms, expectations of behavior and participation in school, and the role of support staff such as counselors or social workers. There should be an approach that is centered on empowering parents to be active participants in their child's education, rather than just solving the problems that arise when dealing with parents of newcomer students.

[88] Roxas, pg. 4
[89] Short, pg. 52

Instilling a sense of community in classrooms is critically important for the success of refugee students, and it is not easily done. Refugee students will behave in ways that make them stick out, and it is a natural inclination for teachers, especially those who are not experienced in working with refugee students, to try to ignore or diminish the problem, rather than address it head-on – and these types of conflicts can take many forms, and be between many different types of students, both refugees and not. Teachers need to be trained and educated about the background of refugee students, and provided with mock-simulation training that preps them to deal with social problems within their classrooms.

For example, Ms. Engler, a teacher at a newcomer program in an urban environment, recorded an anecdote of a scenario where she heard one refugee student insult another refugee student. Both students were from Somalia, but one of the students was part of the Somali Bantu, a "historically oppressed ethnic group who [have been] denied educational opportunities and political rights and were the victims of centuries-long discrimination.[90]"

When Ms. Engler heard the other student insulting this student, and bringing in the student's Somali Bantu background, she addressed the problem directly. She was empowered to do so because she had a contextual and accurate understanding of both students' cultural and personal backgrounds, and was familiar both with the students' personal stories and the history of the places they came from. Ms. Engler then intervened, and approached the conversation as a teachable moment for not only the two directly-involved students, but also for the other students in her class, by exploring "the differences between cultural and gender norms in the students' home countries and the

[90] Roxas, pg. 4

United States, what forms of behavior and language are acceptable in classrooms in the Unite States, and, just as important, the reasons why [the one student]'s type of discriminatory behavior and language is problematic within the context of the country in which these students now reside.[91]"

Refugee students are a subset of English language learners, a diverse and international group of students with unique challenges and unique potentials enrolled in U.S. schools. English language learners are the fastest growing demographic in U.S. public education. It is critically important that schools, parents, and communities become invested in supporting English language learners, as the likelihood of serving a group of students who are non-native English speakers will only increase in the future, and already-existing populations of English language learner students will become larger.

When groups of students are struggling academically or dropping out at high rates, it affects the entire school, not just the students directly involved. For many educators and school communities, especially those with little previous exposure to newcomer students, understanding the backgrounds and situations of refugee students poses a complex, yet incredibly worthwhile, challenge. When schools focus on serving their most vulnerable student population, other students benefit from the increased awareness of students' individual needs, strong sense of community-building, and exposure to the culturally diverse life experiences and perspectives of refugee students and many English language learners.

As with all types of education, providing support for refugee students takes resources, training, time, and dedication. With increased awareness of this issue, educators and

[91] Roxas, pg. 4

communities will realize that there are existing frameworks for addressing the challenges of adequately supporting refugee students. Educators and communities must realize that many of those frameworks are not instinctual and require a dedication to utilizing research on teaching methods and curriculum design in classrooms and schools, advocating for more supportive English language learner policies on local and state levels, and generating tolerance and support for refugee students. To summarize, some of the most critical elements in supporting refugee students in schools[92] include:

- Establishing focused newcomer programs that work within the context of the entire school and funneling as many resources into them as possible in terms of funding, trained teachers, and administrators
- Setting clear goals for the newcomer or support program for refugee students, including entry and exit requirements
- Implementing fair testing for refugee students that recognizes their disadvantage in standardized testing due to their limited English proficiency, without stigmatizing lack of language ability or allowing it to designate refugee students as ignorant or under-performing
- Recognizing that students' English skills do not necessarily correlate with their content area knowledge, and testing accordingly

[92] It must be emphasized here that in many cases, these recommendations apply extremely well to the education of English language learners in general. However, they should not be considered to be a 'one-size fits all' model, and where possible, curriculum design and educational approach should focus on research designed around the specific demographics and needs of the population of students being served – English language learner students, as are refugees, are a very diverse group.

- Understanding that catching up to their English-speaking peers will take refugee students multiple years, and creating flexible programs and intervention methods that empower students to spend this necessary additional time in school
- Ensuring that the curriculum for refugee students balances the time that students spend in intensive English reading, writing and speaking courses with mixed-student content area courses, but that teachers are aware of the appropriate teaching methods to make material accessible to English language learners
- Creating communication platforms for everyone involved (teachers, counselors, and staff) in a refugee student's education, with clearly designated roles, opportunities for instructional collaboration, and methods of assessing the progress and needs of the student
- Encouraging the entire school community to celebrate, rather than ignore or stigmatize, the cultural background and native language abilities of refugee students
- Recognizing that refugee parents, too, require special attention and resources, but that when empowered properly they can be a valuable participant in their child's education
- Providing additional time for learning at school through after-school activities and study halls
- Emphasizing the creation of strong school communities and involving other students and parents in the welcome, orientation, and education of refugee

students and creating events for cultural exchange and the development of inter-personal relationships

CHAPTER IV:

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACED IN BETTERING THE SYSTEM?

> "*[English language learners] are so disproportionately underserved by the public school system, the number of programs and dollars spent per English language learner student are in decline, even as the number of English language learner students has skyrocketed. English language learner students comprise more than 10 percent of the total student population, so why are so many…caught in a struggle for equal access and opportunity?...To deny English language learners equal opportunity and access to a quality education is to slam the door on their future…without the use of ELL-specific strategies and targeted language goal setting, ELLs are not being granted equal access to curriculum content.*"
>
> - National Education Association report on English Language Learner Advocacy for Educators

First and foremost, funding is the most significant challenge for educators hoping to provide better structural support within schools for newcomer students, refugees students, or English language learners. After the implementation of No Child Left Behind, federal funding for programs for English language learners became situated under the Title III section of the act. The budget for Title III has experienced a net increase over the past few years, but "the proportionate amount [spent] per student has actually decreased.[93]" When polled, "some programs saw the increased funding as limited, much of it being spent on the increased test administration and test preparation, which further detracted from important instruction the students needed to receive.[94]"Additionally, while states are still held to federal laws that require schools to identify and provide meaningful education to English language learner students, states in recent years have experienced flexibility in deciding how to fund their programs and meet the requirements of Title III and No Child Left Behind for English language learner

[93] National Education Association, pg. 28
[94] Short, pg. 73

education. The ways in which schools are funded varies widely from district to district all across the country, but there is a clear need to direct increased federal funding towards the education of English language learner students.

When considering funding, there is also a need for widely set standards and regulations to ensure that funding is being used in the most effective ways it can be. The Office of Refugee Resettlement currently distributes $15 million in grants annually to schools to provide integration support and educational programs for refugee students, but this money is given out without clear accountability standards or enforced policies of quality assessment. The Office of Refugee Resettlement's primary form of assessing the impact of these grants is their "ACF Performance Progress Report" which is filled out by grantees on an annual basis, and only requires a short, subjective assessment of the activities funded by the grant, the observed impact, challenges faced in implementation, and future plans for utilizing grant funds[95]. Of course, when applying for discretionary grants applicants have to submit extensive applications and outline their plans for using the funds, but it is not clear that there is an objective standard or quality being enforced in education for refugee students.

In Title III of No Child Left Behind, it is required that education agencies that receive federal funding for limited English proficient students must submit plans that describe: "how their language instruction program will address students' English language development and academic development needs using a scientifically-based rationale, how it will be properly resourced, and how it will be evaluated to ensure its

[95] Office of Refugee Resettlement

success.[96]" In practice, this execution of this requirement is disparate across the country, and the ability of every school district to submit their own self-constructed plan is perhaps not a strength, in that it does not encourage or enforce national collaboration, agreement, or awareness about what works well in education limited English proficient students.

Federal and Office of Refugee Resettlement policies on refugee education should be influenced by long-term research and decisions on funding should be dictated by a clear framework for understanding what types of programs are effective, and which programs are not sound investments. It is not enough to simply throw money at the problem; the funders should set strong standards, provide supportive training and implementation guides, and have accountability and performance expectations.

By ensuring that any educator who is seeking funding for refugee student education has a grounded background in best practices, methods, and strategies for supporting refugee students, funders can ensure that dollars invested are strategic. While this represents a significant undertaking for grant makers (in the serious reformation of an extensive system of allocating funds), whether in federal education or at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, such a shift would be a long term and forward-thinking step away from the current 'entrepreneurship' approach wherein anyone can apply for funding if it appears they have a sound use for the dollars, without assessing the concrete impact or value of their approach.

Often, in the realm of education, regulation is over emphasized, and there is constantly a debate among those in education on the balance to strike between setting

[96] Zacarion, pg 14

strict standards and restricting the creativity and innovation of teachers and schools. Refugee education and, on a broader scale, English language learner education, may be one of the few areas in U.S. education today where a concrete argument can be made for a severe need for increased standards, regulation, and accountability. The tricky part lies in advocating for the student-sensitive development of those standards, and implementing a framework that recognizes the unique demographics, challenges, and needs of English language learners.

It takes a significant amount of additional funds to serve refugee students. In Wichita, Kansas, the school district recently asked the state for a $1 million funding increase to provide services to just 200 new refugee students in the next year. Their new students are originally from Burma, Somalia, and the Congo region of Africa. 95% of their new students have very limited English proficiency. The district anticipated allocating the funds, if received, to hire "eight new teachers, two counselors to deal with PTSD and other emotional issues, and eight English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) paraprofessionals 'to provide intensive language instruction and academic support.'[97]" The school district had not received "any federal immigration funds for [the] fiscal year despite its growing number of refugee and immigrant students[98].

In principle, the written law set down by Title I and Title III of No Child Left Behind require schools to identify students who are English language learners, and to then provide a language instruction educational program, defined in the law as an instructional course "in which a limited English proficient child is placed for the purpose of developing and attaining English proficiency, while meeting challenging State

---

[97] Lowry
[98] Ibid.

academic content and student academic achievement standards.[99]" However, in application, the guidelines that are used in defining certain terms and setting appropriate standards is left to the discretion of state education agencies.

Newcomer programs offer a more holistic approach than typical ESL instruction (often referred to as ESL 1), as they not only emphasize basic English skills but also provide emotional support, by working on students' academic literacy, acculturation to U.S. schooling and beginning to lay the foundations for subject area knowledge[100]. Newcomer programs strive to emphasize that proper support for English language learners and especially those who begin learning English later in life must be long-term and strategic. Research ranging from the 1980's to the last few years shows that it takes "4-7 years [for English language learners] to reach the average academic performance of native English speakers[101]".

Despite the conclusive evidence that English acquisition is a lengthy process that requires strategic support for students who are newcomers and English language learners, schools and newcomer programs are often not structured around this knowledge, and are forced to work on faster timelines and without the necessary support necessary to ensure student success. States like California, Arizona, and Massachusetts recently limited the amount of time that English language learners can be in language support programs, resulting in the closure of many programs. While these types of policies are often rooted in the belief that holding students to higher standards produces faster results and more

[99] Zacarion
[100] Short, page 1
[101] Short, page 2

accountability, these policies forego the strong evidence that time is a valuable commodity in the education of English language learners[102].

Examples of restrictive, rather than supportive, policies include the fact that "newly arrived students are being held to the same accountability standards as their native English-speaking peers. They must participate in rigorous, standards-based curricula and high-stakes assessments before they master the language of instruction.[103]" In the 1990's a great number of separate-site newcomer programs were in operation and served as intensive one-year preparation spaces for newcomer students – and evidence shows that they served the most vulnerable students relatively effectively. Many of these schools were forced to close down as education reforms like No Child Left Behind came into play, because the standards that other schools were being held to did not relax or acknowledge the specific challenges facing the population newcomer programs serve, so these programs could "not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) because their students were always at the lowest levels of English proficiency.[104]"

When standards and tests are applied properly, it can be beneficial to refugee students to be held to high standards. The director of a newcomer program, the Intensive English Program, in Florida, noted that "expecting English language learners to achieve to the level of native English speakers has been a challenge: 'Raising expectations is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, students are motivated to rise to those expectations. On the other hand, expecting the newcomer students to pass a test as

[102] Ibid, page 5
[103] Ibid, page 3
[104] Ibid, page 4

English speakers do is truly unrealistic. Having available an alternate assessment may be the compromise between raising expectations with realistic, attainable results.[105]"

However, the discriminatory policies of No Child Left Behind do not allow for a sensitive understanding of the challenges that students who are limited English proficient face. It is important to hold students to high standards and assert a belief, for both teachers and students, that English language learner students are fully capable of performing at the same or higher level of academic achievement as their native English-speaking peers, *given time*. That is the key addendum, and what is lacking now; a strong concept - built into policies - of the necessary and prolonged *time* it requires for English language learners to catch up to their peers. While increased expectations can be an effective motivating tool, English language learners may be a population of students in which the same types of policies around expectations do not work as effectively; only 32% of newcomer programs reported that the high standards set by No Child Left Behind benefited their students[106].

When policies of school performance and assessment do not discriminate between low-performing students and students who are still struggling to learn English, schools are less incentivized to serve those most-needy students. In one report, the principals of some newcomer programs "expressed a reluctance to have older newcomer students in their school because of the potential within this subpopulation for dropping out, the consequences of which lowers a school's performance status.[107]" No Child Left Behind

[105] Ibid pg. 73
[106] Ibid pg. 73
[107] Ibid pg. 73

requires districts to report 4-year graduation rates, a feat that can be very difficult for refugee and newcomer students.

When schools do not perform well in their 4-year graduation rates, they can face funding cuts and, in some cases, being shut down[108]. Students are no longer eligible to be enrolled in public school after the age of 21, so for refugee students who arrive in their late teens, the pursuit of an education is exceedingly dire and unlikely to succeed. The pre-ninth grade program at Columbus Global Academy was mentioned earlier as an effective way to address this problem; in some districts, students are able to spend up to 3 years in this type of program, thereby extending the amount of remedial English education they can be exposed to before entering the race for a four-year high school diploma. States can choose to address this issue on a broader scale by incorporating school ratings for 5- and 6- year graduation rates, as Texas and New York do[109].

Without the right types of supportive policies, fair assessments, and sufficient funding, teachers face major challenges in being able to reassure their students of their abilities. For many refugee students, college or even post-graduate vocational training can seem unattainable, and without proper support in school, "the question marks about [refugee students'] futures can sometimes engender a perceived lack of motivation among high school newcomers or lead them to drop out of school.[110]"

Brenda Townsend, a teacher at the International High School in Austin, Texas, is an example of someone who has dedicated her career to the most vulnerable students. She leads the intensive reading therapy sessions for illiterate high school students. A

---

[108] Ibid pg. 75
[109] Ibid pg. 75
[110] Ibid pg. 76

story on Ms. Townsend's work explains that, "a confluence of factors beyond their control has brought these particular immigrant students to Townsend's classroom: Many are refugees; few have any formal schooling; and, in addition to issues with English, almost all cannot read or write in their native language.[111]"

The two-year newcomer school Townsend teaches at was created in 2004 in the City of Austin district. Townsend focuses on teaching reading skills to the most vulnerable students, often who are illiterate in their own native language and have extremely limited English proficiency,

> "'We start from ground zero and go up,' Townsend says. 'We have got to get it done. I have them 90 minutes every other day. In all their other classes they're learning biology, they're learning algebra… that 90 minutes I have them, I have got to push hard. I have to teach them to read. And through reading their life will be successful…I just can't stop because the kids are losing time… it is an emergency. It is 9-1-1. You can't live in our society and not read. You just can't.[112]'"

The effort required to assist these most vulnerable students is immense, and for many, truly overwhelming. Janie Carnock, an education policy researcher at the D.C.-based think tank New America, notes it is, "a massive challenge if a kid is coming to school with that level of disrupted education and the school is trying to add English literacy to that…[it] requires a significant investment I'm not sure people are prepared to make. It feels like we just kind of bandage solutions on.[113]"

Educators who have dedicated themselves to understanding refugee students know how important and rewarding it is to try to meet these challenges head-on. One

---

111 Dickie pg. 2
112 Dickie pg. 3
113 Dickie pg. 3

teacher remembers her journey in learning about the unique abilities and obstacles of a refugee student in her classroom, saying,

> "[He] came to our school as a refugee student from Somalia, having suffered the ravages of a civil war…Despite Jason's lack of progress, something told me he was a bright child…I noticed that he never reacted to loud noises. Concerned his hearing was damaged, I asked a doctor friend to examine him. It turns out Jason had two ruptured ear-drums…Fortunately, the doctor donated his services for corrective surgery…Afterward, Jason made such amazing progress, he told me, 'Thank you for making me feel smart!' …Now my school has a team of teachers who collect background, health and family information on our refugee students to ensure we have all the necessary data to provide them with a successful educational experience.[114]"

The U.S. educational system will have to significantly increase its efforts to address the unique challenge of refugee students and other English language learner or newcomer students, or else communities and schools stand to suffer greatly, and a tragic waste of human potential could occur. Anecdotal and research-driven evidence shows us that when educators, communities, and policy makers recognize the importance of investing in refugee students and other English language learner or newcomer students, progress is possible. As awareness of this issue increases, so will the willingness to advocate for and demand additional investment and attention to policies, support, and funding for these groups of students. The challenges are enormous, but they are less than either the potential risk of ignoring the problem, or the potential benefit of a renewed commitment to providing a meaningful education for all students.

[114] National Education Association, pg. 33

CHAPTER V: WHAT ARE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS?

"There is nothing wrong with English language learners- no deficit to fix. They are whole students we must reach and teach in ways that open their minds to the amazing possibilities of their lives, and language must not be a barrier to that goal. English language learners desperately need educators who believe in them, who recognize their assets, and who have the support and training they need to do their best by all of their students… Education is the key and the promise – America's promise – to a better tomorrow. To deny English language learners equal opportunity and access to a quality education is to slam the door on their future. What steps can we take to secure equal access and a promising future for ELL students?… We can start by providing programsand instruction that give ELLs access to the entire curriculum and by supporting policies that value students' [unique backgrounds]."

- National Education Association Guide for English Language Learner Advocacy

It is important to emphasize here the potential for a school-centered resettlement process for refugee families in the U.S. Currently, the Office of Refugee Resettlement does not consider what school access refugee families will have when they are resettled – schools are required by law to enroll any student who lives in their district, so oftentimes refugee students are enrolled in schools that are not experienced in educating students with English language learner status or who have the background of cultural diversity, trauma, and interrupted schooling that so many refugee students do[115]. Based on the experiences of successful newcomer programs, when parents feel involved in their child's education, feel welcomed at their child's school, and are able to easily communicate with teachers and staff at the school, the students and teachers at the school benefit enormously. In some cases, schools have become the centralized connection point to link refugee families with social services.

[115] Office of Refugee Resettlement

Currently, refugee resettlement and services are provided through an incredible variety of religiously affiliated and private organizations. By emphasizing schools as the main source of connection and coordination among the various groups trying to support refugees, many of the problems of overlapping mandates and non-regulated support services for refugee families could be eliminated. When the staff of newcomer programs in schools are well-trained and experienced in working with refugee students, the school can serve as a liaison for parents, by helping "them meet the basic needs for food, clothing, housing, and jobs…so that their students will be better able to learn and more successful in school.[116]" Schools should be able to refer parents to city and county social service agencies, and should create partnerships with local agencies that provide English as a Second Language classes for adults or job training and skill development courses.

In some instances, existing refugee support agencies may be able to support students in schools if the schools are willing to form an official partnership and work closely with the organization. This can make the list of tasks for newcomer programs to complete and the services for them to provide less overwhelming, as well.

For example, at the International Newcomer Academy in Colorado, an official partnership exists with a local nonprofit called Catholic Charities, which "offers interpretation and translation services at school site, provides [home visits with translators to answer parents' questions about school], arranges student access to paid and volunteer tutors…presents workshops to [teaching] staff on cultural orientation and new refugee populations, including why and how they came, trauma issues, educational

[116] Short, pg. 55

backgrounds, and more.[117]" In addition, Catholic Charities receives support from and coordinates with two other local agencies and nonprofits. Refugee families benefit enormously when the organizations in the town or city they are resettled in are well coordinated and work together. Making schools the touchstone of this coordination can make things smoother for everyone involved.

Other types of organizations and partnerships that schools can form through their newcomer programs include linking up,

> "with hospitals, clinics, counseling centers, job centers, food banks, housing assistance groups, and more…For example, students who are enrolling in Columbus Global Academy receive vouchers for free chest X-rays at Children's Hospital to check for tuberculosis. A mobile dental clinic comes to the school twice a year as well. Medical students at the Ohio State University eye clinic perform eye exams once a year and Lenscrafters provides free eyeglass to those in needs. Local hospitals and agencies…provide mental health counseling.[118]"

This type of coordination may be lacking even in established newcomer programs: only 27% of newcomer programs report having active partnerships with refugee resettlement organizations, religious groups, or community ethnic organizations[119]. As has been discussed throughout this paper, the solutions to some of the issues faced in refugee education do not lie in creating entirely new frameworks and programs, but rather in lending attention and resources to the issues and implementing new levels of coordination, organization, and supportive policies.

Properly trained teachers and staff can make a world of difference for refugee students and all English language learner students. Only 13% of teachers,

> "have received professional development on teaching English language learner students, and despite the growing numbers of English language learners, only three states

---

[117] Short, pg. 56
[118] Short, pg. 58
[119] Short, pg. 58

have policies that require all teachers to have some expertise in teaching English language learners effectively…well-meaning teachers with inadequate training can sabotage their own efforts to create positive learning environments through hyper-criticism of errors; not seeing native language usage as an appropriate scaffold; ignoring language errors.[120]"

The best methods for educating refugee students and English language learner students are not intuitive, and teachers should be provided proper support and training to work with these students.

Meaningful support for the education of refugee students requires a coordinated effort at multiple levels. Below, a summary of key action or policy recommendations is arranged according to the identity of the person considering action (non-refugee parents or students, teachers, school administrators, and education policy makers). These are meant to be brief summations of points that were explained in more detail throughout the earlier parts of the paper. They are dictated in a personal form to be accessible, concise, and memorable.

For non-refugee parents or students: Learn whether your school has refugee students, and what types of support are being provided to them. Form an interpersonal relationship with the student or their families by asking school staff to introduce you. Utilize your own social network at the school to welcome the refugee students and coordinate events, such as a potluck, to share food and cultural exchange. Try to assess whether refugee students are getting the help and services they need, or if you can connect them to organizations and nonprofits in town that provide refugee support services they may be unaware of, such as tutoring or English as a Second Language courses. Look up resources online on how to be an advocate for refugees in schools, and

[120] National Council of Teachers of English, pg. 6

get involved in any welcoming campaigns that are being run by your school district, local nonprofits, or state government.

For teachers: Learn about the legally protected rights and privileges of your refugee students. Assess whether your school is doing enough to provide for students, and become an advocate for the creation of a specialized newcomer program, or at least elements of such a program, within your school. In your classroom, promote open dialogue and provide a platform for students to learn about their refugee classmates' backgrounds and cultures. Petition your administrators to provide you and other teachers with professional development that will teach effective methods for educating refugee students, such as sheltered instruction. Take students' test grades as revealing, but not defining, and think about how you can advocate for the development of a long-term support program for refugee, newcomer, or English language learner students in your school. Work closely with counselors and other teachers to create a team dedicated to the students' success and to assessing their progress. Develop an understanding of the personal experiences of your students, and find the confidence to form a relationship with them, even if you cannot understand one another's words at first.

For school administrators: Advocate at a state level for increased Title III or grant funding to provide education support services to refugee students and others who may share similar sets of needs (newcomers, English language learners). Create a feasible, five-year-action plan for the development of teachers, programs, and policies that will support the long-term education of these students. Create after-school events that students and their families' can participate in; focus on welcoming the entire family, not just the student, to the school and on providing a meaningful orientation to the

expectations and organization of your school. Set up mentoring, tutoring, or peer matching programs. Form partnerships with the other stakeholders in social support for these students, whether they are local nonprofits or healthcare providers; view your school as the hub of support for these students and their families. Implement meaningful and fair testing for students, and be strategic in forming requirements and curricula that both challenge and accommodate the students.

For education policy makers: Support the reform or elimination of policies that are shown to inhibit the proper support of English language learners. These include requirements to test students in their first year of enrollment, penalizing schools for student performance without exempting the results of students identified as English language learners, failing to recognize the prolonged nature of English acquisition for students by overly emphasizing 4-year graduation rates and enforcing unattainable standards for progression. Implement policies that support these students, such as requiring schools to provide both English and native-language content area assessments, directing additional funding towards districts supporting English language learners, and setting nationally-regulated, thoughtful standards for English language learner education that are based on long-term, sound research.

CONCLUSION

In the hopes that it will not be too jarring to the reader for the author to suddenly develop a personal tone, I'd like to share what this topic means to me.

In the summer of my sophomore year of college, I spent seven weeks working as a volunteer educator at iLearn, an academic summer camp for about 60 refugee students who have been in the U.S. for less than a year. The program is designed to give students a boost on English skills, as well as prep them for the social and academic norms of U.S. public schools. This is where I first met Mohammed, the ten-year-old student (again, his name is an alias) mentioned in the introduction.

For the first five weeks of the program, he consistently goofed around, was unwilling to focus, and could barely stay in his seat. It became extremely frustrating at times to work with him, and I felt like I had no idea how to get through to him. On the playground during breaks, we had a blast; playing soccer and hide-and-go seek. In that context, I knew him to be an affectionate, intelligent and competent kid, even if our ability to communicate was extremely limited, but in the classroom it was like he was someone else; there was no confidence, and no drive to succeed.

Still, something told me to persist with patience. We worked steadfastly everyday on learning the alphabet and spelling basic three-letter words. I began to gain awareness that Mohammed's lack of motivation might stem from a lack of confidence, rather than belligerency. He had never attempted to learn the English alphabet before, and now here was a stranger who could not speak his language and was expecting him to believe that he could tackle the challenge head-on. I was limited in how much I could do to show him that it was possible, beyond telling him over and over that I knew he could do it and that

we would not stop until he could. Still, he squirmed in his seat and tried to distract himself or me throughout most sessions.

Then one day, it all clicked. I can never be sure what happened; whether he suddenly found himself able to remember the letters and their arrangements, or whether there were gradual progress signs that I failed to notice. That day when I came to check on him, he had finished his entire worksheet and was steadfastly working on another with a look of concentration on his face and pencil working vigorously. When I told him it was time for recess, he asked to stay at his desk and keep working.

That summer, I was exposed to the unspeakably tragic backgrounds and lived experiences of many refugees. I was exposed to the reality of life for refugees, even the lucky few who are resettled in a country like the U.S.. As I looked around the room at the 60 students I had come to know, love, and respect, I felt intimately the burden of the limited futures of these students; statistically speaking, many in the room would not even graduate from high school.

It didn't make sense to me. In many ways, the U.S. is making an investment when it commits to resettling refugees; an admirable and worthwhile investment in people who are uniquely poised to contribute to society. Yet for so many, this investment is never allowed to produce a return; refugees are funneled into low-wage jobs and not provided with the meaningful education required to succeed.

I have learned two significant things from my research. The first is that the problem is far more complex and nuanced than I could ever have imagined, and any meaningful change will require dedication and effort from a great number and variety of individuals. The second is that there *is* hope. There are models of success. There are

tangible steps and policies to advocate for. There are people who are paying attention to this issue, and who are continuing to alert others around them to the importance of it. More than anything, there are individuals all over the country who are living proof of the rewards to communities and societies when refugees are supported to truly flourish in their life here. If you have not experienced this personally, I encourage you to do so.

Thank you for reading.

Signed,

Mikaila Smith

WORKS CITED

Ad Council. National Campaign Encourages Acceptance and Support for Refugees in the U.S. Published June 20 2016. http://www.adcouncil.org/News-Events/Press-Releases/National-Campaign-Encourages-Acceptance-and-Support-for-Refugees-in-the-U.S

American Immigration Council. *An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy.* Published online 18 Nov 2015. Accessed November 2016 at https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/overview-us-refugee-law-and-policy

Bal, Aydin. *Becoming Learners in U.S. Schools: A Sociocultural Study of Refugee Students' Evolving Identities*, Arizona State University, Ann Arbor, 2009.http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/304829785?accountid=7118.

Breiseth, Lydia. Colorin Colorado. *What You Need to Know about ELLs: Fast Facts.* Published 2015. Accessed online http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/what-you-need-know-about-ells-fast-facts

Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services. Accessed online at http://www.brycs.org/schools.cfm

Brown University. What is Sheltered Instruction? Accessed online at ttps://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/what-sheltered-instruction

BRYCS. Spring 2008 Spotlight. Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools. Accessed online at http://www.brycs.org/documents/upload/brycs_spotspring2008-2.pdf

Capps, Randy et all. Migration Policy Institute. *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges.* Published online June 2015. Accessed at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges

Center on Instruction. *Practical Guidelines for the Education of English Language Learners: Research Recommendations for Serving Adolescent Newcomers.* 9 November 2007. Accessed online at http://www.centeroninstruction.org/practical-guidelines-for-the-education-of-english-language-learners-research-based-recommendations-for-serving-adolescent-newcomers

Carnock, Jaynie. New America. *The Critical Role Schools Play in Responding to Refugees.* Published online 24 Nov 2015. Accessed at https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/educating-refugees-us-schools/

Delgado, Michelle. The Atlantic. *The Refugee Elected President.* 7 Nov 2016. Accessed online at http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/11/the-refugee-elected-president/506843/

Department of Education. Developing Programs for English Language Learners: Lau v. Nichols. Accessed online at http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ell/lau.html

Department of State. *The Reception and Placement Program.* Accessed online 2016 at http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm

Dickie, Graham. Unpublished piece on International High School in Austin, Texas.

Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. Migration Policy Institute. *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum.* Published online October 2015. Accessed 2016 at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-experiences-refugee-children-countries-first-asylum

Ed Glossary. English language learner (2013, August 29). In S. Abbott (Ed.), The glossary of education reform. Retrieved from http://edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum in November 2016.

Edwards, Adrian. UNHCR. *Global forced displacement hits record high.* Published online 20 June 2016. Accessed at http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits- record-high.html in 2016.

Fox News. 'I Did Not Find the School That I Deserved': Refugees Sue Pa. School District. 19 August 2016. Accessed online at http://insider.foxnews.com/2016/08/19/refugees-sue-pennsylvania-school-district-claim-their-education-isnt-good-enough

Garunay, Melanie. White House. *Email from Madeleine Albright: When I was Welcomed as a Refugee.* 20 September 2016. Accessed online at https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2016/09/20/email-madeleine-albright-when-i-was-welcomed-refugee

Henderson, Tim. The Seattle Times. *America's shrinking small towns see hope in refugees.* 15 August 2016. Accessed online at http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/americas-shrinking-small-towns-see-hope-in-refugees/

Johnson, Roy. *Texas is failing its English language learners.* Published 12 September 2015. Accessed online at http://www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/article/Texas-is-failing-its-English-language-learners-6498859.php

Kokemuller, Neal. Classroom.com *Graduated High School Students vs. Dropouts.* Accessed online at http://classroom.synonym.com/graduated-high-school-students-vs-dropouts-1483.html

Krebs, Gretchen. *An American Education: Refugees and new immigrants face challenges to graduation.* Deseret News. Published online. 9 Jan 2013. Accessed November 2016. http://national.deseretnews.com/article/1041/an-american-education- refugees-and-new-immigrants-face-challenges-to-graduation.html

Lowry, Bryan. The Wichita Eagle. *Wichita Schools seeking $1 million in extraordinary need funding, citing refugee enrollment.* 17 August 2015. Accessed online at http://www.kansas.com/news/local/education/article31344761.html

Lubell, David. CNN. *How Refugees Help Their Communities.* Published online 20 June 2016. Accessed at http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/20/opinions/world-refugee-day-lubell-and-peric/

National Center for Education Statistics. Page on English Language Learners. Accessed online https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=96

National Council of Teachers of English. English Language Learners Policy Research Brief. 2008. Accessed online at http://www.ncte.org

National Education Association. *English Language Learners Face Unique Challenges* 2008. Accessed at www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/ELL_Policy_Brief_Fall_08_(2).pdf

Office of Refugee Resettlement. Policy Guidance and Reporting Forms. Accessed online at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/policy-guidance-reporting-forms

Pyle, Encarnacion. The Columbus Dispatch. Published online 18 September 2015. Accessed online at http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2015/09/17/refugees-impact-on-community.html

Refugee Council USA. Contributions of Refugees to the U.S. Accessed online at http://www.rcusa.org/contributions-of-refugees-to-the-us/

Refugee Health, Technical Assistance Center. Mental Health. Accessed online 2016 at http://refugeehealthta.org/physical-mental-health/mental-health/

Rodriguez Zelaya, Beatriz A. *English Language Learners and Best Practices,* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014.

Roebuck, Jeremy. The Monitor. *Court-ordered ESL overhaul scrapped on appeal.* Published 23 March 2010. Accessed online at http://www.themonitor.com/court-ordered-esl-overhaul-scrapped-on-appeal/article_f6eafb8f-8df4-57ef-a9c1-be7648f7b1c1.html

Roxas, K. C. (2011). Creating Communities: Working with Refugee Students Classrooms.*Democracy and Education*, 19 (2), Article 5. Available at: http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol19/iss2/5

Short, D. J., & Boyson, B. A. (2012). *Helping newcomer students succeed in secondary schools and beyond.* Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Accessed online at www.cal.org/help-newcomers-succeed in 2016.

Thorstensson, Liv. Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement. *Learning English and "Smartness": Refugee Students Negotiate Language, Reception, and Ability in School.* 2013. Accessed online http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1056&context=jsaaea

White House Task Force on New Americans. *Strengthening Communities by Welcoming and Integrating Immigrants and Refugees.* Published 15 April 2015. Accessed online at https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/04/15/strengthening-communities-welcoming-and-integrating-immigrants-and-refugees

Wilson, Jill. Brookings Institute. *Investing in English Skills: The Limited English Proficient Workforce in U.S. Metropolitan Areas.* 24 September 2014. Accessed online at https://www.brookings.edu/research/investing-in-english-skills-the-limited-english-proficient-workforce-in-u-s-metropolitan-areas/#/M10580/

Wright, W. E. (2010). Foundations for Teaching English Language Learners: Research, Theory, Policy, and Practice. Excerpt from Chapter 3, "Language and Education Policy for ELLs." (pp. 70-76). © Caslon Publishing. Printed with permission, all rights reserved.

Zacarion, Debra. Colorin Colorado. *Serving English Leaners: Laws, Policies, and Regulations.* 2012. Accessed online at http://www.colorincolorado.org/sites/default/files/Policy_Guide_Final.pdf

Zong, Jie and Batalova, Jeanne. Migration Policy Institute. *Refugees and Asylees in the United States.* Published online 28 October 2015. Accessed at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states in 2016.

POST-READING ACTIONS

If you wish to further your knowledge of refugee issues internationally or in the U.S., here is a jumping off point for resources. This list is by no means comprehensive, and I strongly encourage you use your discretion in pursuing your interest in this topic.

A resource to help you find local opportunities for volunteering with refugee populations by tutoring, providing orientation services, working as an ESL mentor, or other: https://www.whitehouse.gov/aidrefugees

A resource to help you understand how refugees make their way to the U.S.: https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/

A resource to help you dive further into the world of education policy for refugees (I highly recommend using this organization's search database on your own terms): http://www.nea.org/home/61723.htm

A resource to help you understand the plight of refugees worldwide: http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html

A resource to learn about volunteer and advocacy work for international populations of refugees (If you are wishing to make a donation to a refugee support agency, I highly recommend the International Rescue Committee): https://www.rescue.org/

A resource to explore the personal stories of refugees: http://stories.unhcr.org/us

I also recommend following prominent refugee agencies and local refugee agencies on social media, or subscribing to their newsletters.

BIOGRAPHY

Mikaila Smith was born in Australia as a dual-citizen, and has lived in Austin, Texas for most her of life. At the University of Texas she was a Plan II Honors student and also completed a Bridging Disciplines Program certificate in Social Entrepreneurship and Nonprofit Management. She is a graduate of the University of Texas Archer Fellowship Program and was a Rapoport scholar during her time at UT. Her interests lie in public policy, environmental policy, education, sustainable development, and human rights. After graduating, Mikaila will be doing an internship at the United Nations in New York City before going to Oxford for her master's.